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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the kinds of talk that children in three different preschools typically experience during storybook read-alouds and other interactions with print. The paper situates these experiences within everyday classroom life and describes the ways these contrasting experiences may be related to the development of literacy and literary understandings by discussing the story telling and story writing of three precocious children from low-income families. Despite support at home with resources, limited classroom resources (in terms of the number and varieties of books and limited opportunities to participate in literate activities) impoverish the storyworlds of the students. Three figures of children's drawings and writings are included. Contains 24 references. (RS)

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# Exposing the Edge of the Preschool Curriculum: Teachers' Talk about Text and Children's Literary Understandings

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# Exposing the Edge of the Preschool Curriculum: Teachers' Talk about Text and Children's Literary Understandings

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## National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning

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**Abstract**

In this paper we describe the kinds of talk that children in three different preschools typically experience during storybook read-alouds and other interactions with print. We situate these experiences within everyday classroom life and describe the ways these contrasting experiences may be related to the development of literacy and literary understandings by discussing the story telling and story writing of three precocious children from low-income families.

# Exposing the Edge of the Preschool Curriculum: Teachers' Talk about Text and Children's Literary Understandings

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Literacy development cannot easily be pulled out and studied apart from the contexts of everyday life that sustain it (Cazden, 1992). Studies of young children at home have contributed much to our understanding of the experiences children might have with literacy before entering school (Snow & Ninio, 1986; Teale, 1986; Wells, 1985). And for decades now, researchers have studied classroom instruction and learning, attempting to link dimensions of teachers' behaviors with improved educational outcomes for children. Classroom life is complex, however, with children and teachers *mutually* negotiating the patterns of their learning and living together (Mehan, 1992). Classroom life is said to take on a "culture" of its own: Participants in the culture know what to expect from each other; they can predict the rituals and routines; they know the norms for what is right behavior and appropriate ways of interacting; they learn what is valued. Sociolinguists call language and literacy development *situated* learning because "academic consequences" derive from daily participation in different patterns of classroom life with different social and cognitive demands (Green, Cantor, & Rogers, 1990, p. 361).

Through our work at the National Research Center for Literature Teaching and Learning we have been observing low-income or language minority children in publicly funded and private preschools in order to get a sense of how classroom life influences the development of literacy and literary understandings. We would concur that there are indeed academic consequences that flow from membership in different classroom communities. Although our work is exploratory, we believe that we can suggest possible academic consequences by examining children's oral and written language protocols and the teachers' talk around text that helped shape children's language productions. Teachers' talk may be thought of as the "exposed edge of the school curriculum" (Cazden, 1992, p.) that helps shape children's perceptions of their role in the intellectual life of the classroom. Children respond in ways that are consistant with what they have learned, and these responses, in turn, influence what teachers think of them as learners, and

in this case, as readers and writers.

As children talk about books and try to create their own literary texts, their protocols suggest to us possible relationships between the development of literacy and literary understandings, on the one hand, and children's classroom resources and opportunities to participate in literate practices, on the other. To illustrate the influence that different preschool experiences might have on children's literary development, we describe the literary understandings of three very capable children from low-income and language minority families. Each child participates in a different urban preschool program: Daqueesh, an African-American child in a Head Start program; Kathy, an African-American girl, in a subsidized child development day care center; and Mei-Ling, an ESL child from China, in the university day care for children of students. The parents of all three children are highly supportive of their children's education, they hold high expectations for their futures, and in varying degrees, they provide literary resources for the children at home.

Daqueesh

Daqueesh lives with his mother, father, and baby sister. Both parents attended parochial school themselves and said that they would have sent Daqueesh to a parochial school for 4-year-olds if one had been available in their neighborhood. His parents ordered several books from the Dr. Suess bookclub through the mail, and they ordered a parent manual with tapes and a set of Disney books from a door to door salesman. They told us that these parent materials were expensive and they paid a little bit toward their bill each month. Daqueesh's parents have saved all his preschool papers and they store them in a big box under his bed --"All the stuff he did; we're going to keep it till he gets older so he can see it." Everyday Daqueesh works on his letters and numbers at home:

> We've been doing this since he was two. He knew his ABCs before he turned two. He knew by sayin it.... [Now] when we go home I tell him to print his name like 20 times.... Then I spell his last name and make him do it over and over and over again. Then he do his ABCs...He'll write them down; he'll just keep doing them over.

Daqueesh's parents think he is "very intelligent" and "smarter" than his peers in Head Start. They told us that he can read McDonalds and Burger King and "all kinds of sneakers." Daqueesh will bring a video tape to his mother and be able to tell her what it is, and she said she asks him,"How did you know that? Did you read this?" His dad expected Daqueesh to definitely go to college so he can be "whatever--a doctor, a lawyer; he's smart; he's real good at numbers; he doesn't forget things; he is not shy."

In Head Start, Daqueesh listened to stories almost everyday, but the stories his teachers chose to read aloud were drawn primarily from one particular genre: the rhyming cumulative story such as Mr. Gumpy's Outing (Burningham, 1984). The teacher expected the children to participate fully in choral reading of these familiar texts, which had been read to the children repeatedly. The teacher paused at junctures in the text and waited for the children to supply the

exact words in the next bit of text. Daqueesh's teacher had been told by a supervisor that group time could only last for 10 minutes (because of 4-year-olds' short attention span); she also believed that the children needed active involvement in order to stay on task during read alouds. Therefore, short books that built on repetitive phrases and a cumulative story line were most often selected for read alouds. The following excerpt illustrates this style of storybook reading in this particular genre. Note the strict adherence to the exact text (*in italics*).

| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | [reads text] ...*May I come please Mr. Gumpy said the pigs. Very well* |
| Students: | But don't oink oink.. all about...don't oink all about |
| Teacher: | What's the word that Mr. Gumpy says? |
| Students: | Don't don't tease.. don't chase the dog, don't chase the cat, don't chase the dog, don't... |
| Teacher: | This is the pig; this is the pig. What does he say about the pig? |
| Students: | Don't chase... Moo ... don't chase the cat, don't chase the rabbit, don't chase the dog... |
| Teacher: | He's on the right track. Mr. Gumpy says a different word. |
| Students: | I know. Don't oink about |
| Teacher: | He says don't what about? |
| Students: | Don't what about |
| Teacher: | What does he say? |
| Students: | Don't kick ... don't oink |
| Teacher: | It sounds like chalk |
| Students: | Don't chalk about |
| Teacher: | It sounds like chalk |
| Students: | I know don't oink about |
| Teacher: | It sounds like chalk. Does oink sound like chalk? [reads] *Don't muck about* |

Based on monthly observations of children in this Head Start program, we believe that this reading is representative of storybook interactions there. Daqueesh, like the other children, was always eager to participate and thoroughly engaged in the read-aloud activities. These routines were predictable and the cumulative story genres (and particular books within this genre) were familiar. Other read-aloud experiences with different kinds of books were rare, even during visits to the public library where videos were typically shown to Daqueesh's class instead of story activities. Most of Daqueesh's browsing time in the library was spent with other familiar stories -- those based on video and movie characters. Daqueesh's enduring favorite was Peter Pan; he loved pouring over the sumptuous illustrations in several hardbound versions of the story of the boy from Never-never-land, frequently taking on the role of Peter or Captain Hook in spontaneous dramatic play. Daqueesh's parents told us that he also had Disney books and video tapes at home. He was not allowed to sign books out of the public library because early in the school year he lost a book and his parents had to pay for it.

When we interviewed Daqueesh after reading the Three Billy Goats Gruff (Asbjornsen & Moe, 1991) to him, we encouraged him to create his own literary text -- "a story" -- with the folktale serving as a springboard for response and discussion. We asked him what he would do if he were in the story; what character he would like to be (the biggest Billy Goat Gruff, of

course), and would he like to draw a picture to show us. Daqueesh said that he did not know how to make goats, but that he would draw a Ninja (See Figure 1). When the observer asked if he would tell a story to go with his Ninja, Daqueesh referred her to a movie for the "story." To Daqueesh , "story" seemed to mean "movie." He thought everyone had already watched it --- what was there to tell?

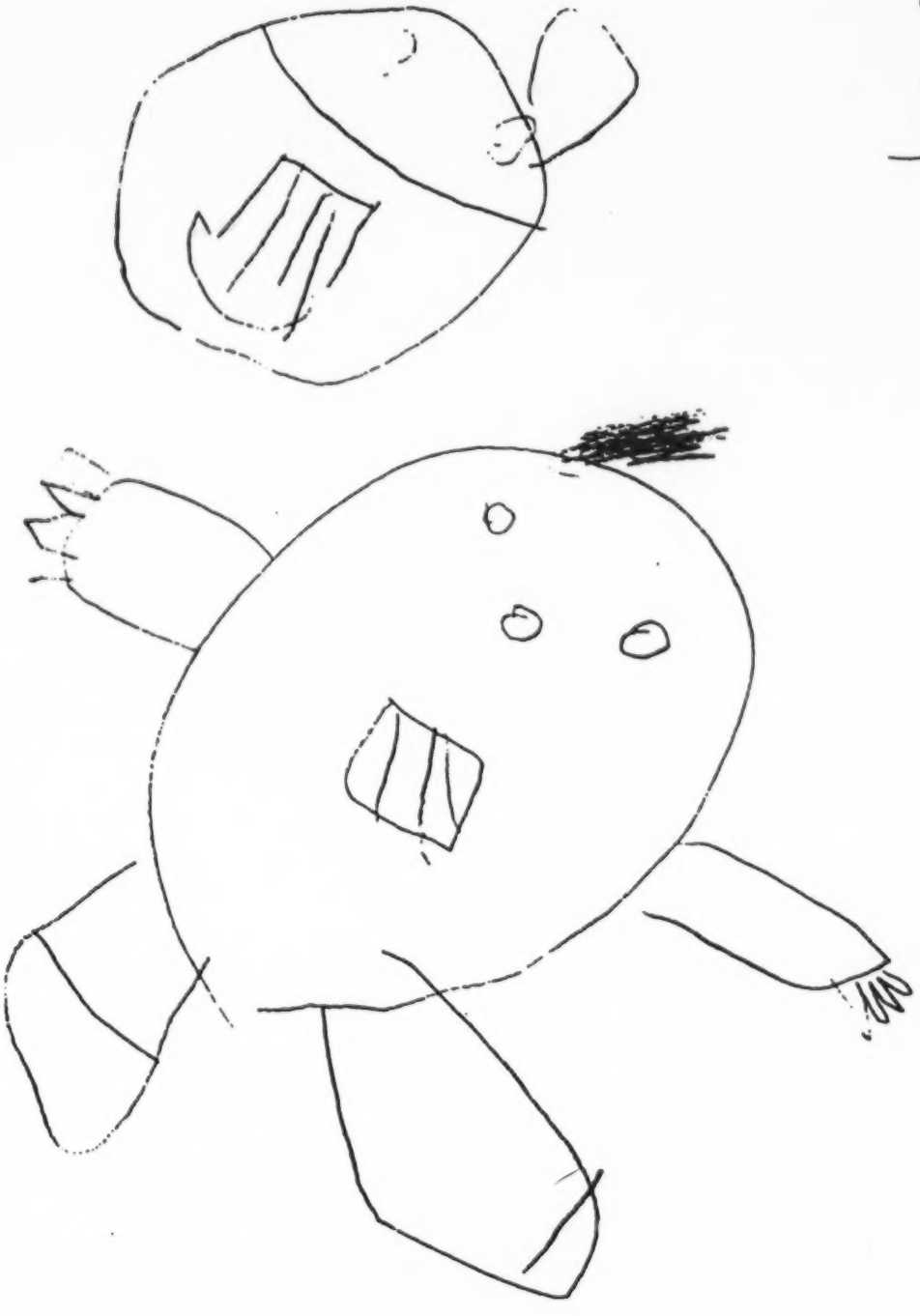
| | |
|---|---|
| Daqueesh: | Ninja go like this I show you [draws figures; see Figure 1] |
| Observer: | You want to tell me the story? |
| Daqueesh: | You'all watch Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles... the name of it. |
| Observer: | The movie? The one your teacher brought in? You mean the one about the slime? |

"Writing a story" seemed to mean reproducing the exact written title of the movie -- the title and credits are, of course, the only print in videos, and the title is the most conspicuous print on video cartridges. Daqueesh also wanted the observer to do the writing because he wanted it done the right way. He ultimately asked his teacher how to write the name of the Ninja video that he was thinking of.

| | |
|---|---|
| Daqueesh: | Can you write that? |
| Observer: | You mean can I draw it? You can draw better Ninjas than me. |
| Daqueesh: | I don't know how to write no Ninjas name |
| Observer: | Like this? [writes N-i-n-j-a] |
| Daqueesh: | No the green one |
| Observer: | You know, I don't know who he was |
| Daqueesh: | It was like this [writes a T] Like this [writes more letters]... It's Raphael...No I'm going to... we're going to have to ask Patty [teacher]. Would Patty know? This is the name of the ... I think it starts like this [still writing and whispering to himself] It got a J on it too. I think they call this the J. I'm go ask Patty how Mutant Ninja Turtle go ... |

After Daqueesh drew the Ninjas and captioned it with the title of the video, the observer asked if he would like to write her a different story. Daqueesh asked, "Do you know how to draw Peter Pan?" Because Daqueesh has experienced only cumulative stories (that usually rhyme) and video-based stories as texts, he may have had a difficult time stepping into the more unfamiliar text world of the traditional folktale. Likewise, although Daqueesh's captions demonstrated at least the beginnings of the alphabetic principle in the way he tried to generate word spellings, his ideas about how to create a story may have been inhibited by storybook interactions that required the children to reproduce the text exactly in order to participate.

As for writing, children in this program did not do any writing during the year except to practice the printing of their names. Pencils were not distributed to the children until



mid-year. Usable writing materials of any sort were in short supply, as the following excerpt about a pencil with an eraser suggests:

| | |
|---|---|
| Child: | I'm not sure [erases] What does this mean? What is this? |
| Observer: | The eraser? |
| Child: | You sharp it? |
| Observer: | You sharpen this part. |
| Child: | You sharp it? |
| Observer: | This part but not the eraser. When you need to use the eraser all up then its gone. You have to stick [another] one on top |
| Child: | You go like this? Then the thing come off? |
| Observer: | Not in this one. This one you stick in a pencil sharpener. |
| Child: | Then can it ... they sharp it? |

There was obviously a paucity of experience either writing or watching others write in this program. It seemed to us that a lack of experience with a wider variety of literary genres and no opportunity to write anything but his name surely limited the text worlds that Daqueesh creates.

Mei-Ling

Mei-Ling is an only child of parents who have immigrated from China to the U.S. for work and graduate school study. Mei-Ling, learning English as a second language, was already very fluent. She attended the university day care where there were other children who spoke her Chinese dialect as well as many other Asian children. Because Mei-Ling's mother was a busy graduate student, she said she only read to Mei-Ling on Sundays. With a limited number of books at home -- including an anthology of folktales, a set of Disney books, and a children's picture dictionary as well as many coloring books -- the same stories were read many times. Mei-Ling had no Chinese books but she did have tapes of Chinese stories. Mei-Ling's mother chose books for home (she did not approve of the "turtle" books) but Mei-Ling selected her own coloring books. Mei-Ling's mother encouraged her to independently read and spell English words using a Franklin electronic speller together with her picture dictionary. Mei-Ling liked to read to herself at home, work with the Franklin speller, and write the names of her friends and family members. Compared to the preschools in China, Mei-Ling's mother thought that the university day care did not teach enough academics, but she was not concerned because Mei-Ling had academic stimulation at home. Her mother expected her to at least finish college and perhaps a Ph.D. or medical degree, depending on what Mei-Ling wants.

At the university day care, children were encouraged to write for their own purposes. The children made birthday cards, going away cards, and get well cards for each other. Every day the teacher and teacher assistant wrote a two page summary of everything interesting the 4-year-olds did and they posted this letter on the parent information bulletin board; parents in turn left notes on this board for the teachers. Sometimes the multicultural books reminded children of the lives they left behind when they came to this country; teachers assisted children in

writing letters to grandmothers and grandfathers and other family members who may live in far-off places. For example, one day Mei-Ling woke up from her nap crying because she missed her mother. Her teacher suggested that Mei-Ling write her mom a note telling her how much she loved her and missed her (See Figure 2). Although the teacher assisted Mei-Ling with the writing of her note, it is clear that Mei-Ling was developing concepts about letter and sound relationships and the idea of writing as a way to communicate personal meanings. The prompting provided by the teachers to create messages for friends and family plus the instruction in alphabet identification, letter sounds, and printing supported Mei-Ling's development in a way that was not observable in the preschools for income-eligible children. At home, the Franklin speller and children's dictionary complemented Mei-Ling's interest in expressing herself in writing.

Just as we did with Daqueesh, we talked with other children in our study about the folktale, The Three Billy Goats Gruff (Asbjornsen & Moe, 1991). Whereas Daqueesh had a difficult time putting himself into the story and talking about it or drawing a picture to represent his ideas, Mei-Ling did not. She said she would sit on a hill for awhile looking at the goats, and then she would push each of them into the water so that the troll could not eat them. As for the troll, Mei-Ling (turning pages as she spoke) said,

> I would, I would sting him. And sting him again. Then I'll push him. And push him and sting him. And I will push him again, and will sting him, and push him. Now, I'm gonna broke him into the water... and I will quickly go down there and get the little goats quickly get them, run, run, run to there and make them [safe], and they gonna stay there little bit, little bit there ... and I will save their whole life. Now I'm gonna feed them.

Although Mei-Ling had an anthology of folktales at home, she also participated in a preschool community where there were many books displayed and many different genres of books represented, including European, African and Asian folktales. The ease with which she moved through the folktale and into the storyworld seems linked to her familiarity with the genre acquired from literary resources at school and home. Sociolinguist Shirley Brice-Heath (1986) argues that "it is through imagination -- the recombining of ideas into new wholes -- that writers create texts and readers interpret them, and critical to imaginative powers is an ability to create future images verbally" (p. 158). During storybook read-alouds at the university day care, teachers explicitly encouraged children to use their imagination to interpret texts. As an example, we present an exerpt from one reading of Ben's Trumpet (Isadora, 1979), a book that the teacher said was one of her favorites because she also loves music. The story is illustrated in spare black and white images; it is about a boy who loves jazz and sees himself as a trumpeter.

Teacher: [reads text, *in italics*] *On his way home from school he goes by the Zig Zag Club.* [points to print in illustration] Zig Zag Club -- that's what that sign says and there's Ben practicing his trumpet.

Student: He's not really

DEAR MOM,

I LOVU. I MESS

UVARE MOCK

TO PAY. I WAS

VARE SADWA

I WOK UP FRON

NAP BE COSI

THOTU WERE

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HOMI WONAT

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| | |
|---|---|
| Teacher: | Is there a trumpet in his hands? |
| Student: | No. |
| Teacher: | So, what's he doing? |
| Students: | He's using his hand ... and his imagination. |
| Teacher: | [reads text] *The next day, after school, Ben stops and listens to the musicians practicing a red hot piece. He starts blasting away at his trumpet. Some kids in front of the candy store watch him. Hey, what ya doing? they yell. Ben stops and turns around. What ya think ya doing? they ask again. I'm playing my trumpet, Ben answers. Man, yor're crazy. You got no trumpet. They laugh and laugh.* |
| Teacher: | Does he have a trumpet? |
| Students: | No |
| Teacher: | He's using his imagination. So maybe these children who are making fun of him aren't using their imagination. |
| Student: | Maybe they don't believe in imagination. |
| Teacher: | Maybe. |
| Student: | Maybe he has a real one. |

Through conversations about the illustrations and the language, teachers and children collaboratively worked their way into the text, creating shared images and sharing individual understandings about the stories, the characters, and connections between the text and the lives and experiences of the children and teachers. Even though the children are only 4-years-olds, the teacher tapped into their understandings and built upon their questions to explore the text, in much the same way as Langer and her colleagues in another project at the National Center for Literature Teaching and Learning have been doing with students who are much older (Langer, 1990; Close, 1990).

Kathy

Kathy is African-American, the daughter of a single working mother. She attended the 4-year-old class of children at the subsidized child care center where there were only 11 books available for the children to handle. Read-aloud stories were selected from the teacher's personal library of books, which the children did not have access to. Nonetheless, the children usually (but not always) had a daily opportunity to listen to a popular children's book purchased from a book club. Unlike the interactions at the university day care, children here seldom have an opportunity to discuss the books. The teacher rarely invited children into any sort of discussion about books, even though she read many stories that stimulated the children's imagination. Any call-outs or comments were usually sternly rebuked, even when comments were appropriate, as for example, in this interaction transcribed from the storybook reading of The Pet Show (Keats, 1972). The teacher was reading from the text [*in italics*]: *Everyone was talking about the pet show. The kids told each other about the pets they would bring. Matt said he would bring ants. "I'm gonna bring my mouse," bragged Roberto. "What are you going to bring?"* (p. 4). Jerrod, a student in the group, called out, "I would bring something scary like a lion or a bear." Rather than acknowledge this comment (or any other comment), the teacher insisted that the children wait until

the end of the story, and then cut off any discussion. On another occasion, the teacher did not address children's questions during a storybook reading of Grandfather Twilight (Berger, 1984), leaving the children confused and frustrated. Rather than jointly constructing the meaning of the piece by building on the children's understandings -- moving between the text and what the children know -- the teacher simply said, "We'll have to read and find out." In this metaphorical tale, the end of the day-- twilight -- is compared to an old man who takes a pearl and gives it to "the silence above the sea" (p.21). Some children commented, "Wow....pretty....look, the pearl is flying up to the sky." Another child asked, "Is that the pearl, Miss Ann?" The teacher responded, "It must be. Remember, they said that the pearl gets bigger." At the end of the story, the teacher turned to the children and said, "Look kids. The pearl got big and it's in the sky and it looks like a beautiful moon. Weren't the pictures beautiful? Now, let's clean up."

During storybook readings in this center, the objective seemed to be to keep the children absolutely quiet and seated on their piece of tape (on the rug) at some distance from the illustrations and print in the book; if they commented at all, or moved forward to better see the book, they were viewed as misbehaving. In spite of the variety of genres that were read to the children, there was scant opportunity for children to reflect on the text, make personal connections, or even to have their words validated.

At home, on the other hand, Kathy's experiences were very different. Kathy inherited a large selection of books from her older brother, according to her mother. Therefore, new books were rarely bought for Kathy, and when they were, Kathy's mother selected them (mostly activity books) with an eye toward what she thought Kathy would need to learn before kindergarten -- numbers and letters. At Christmas, however, Kathy received a set of Disney books. She also ordered a few books through the preschool book club, and her mother regularly took her to the public library where she borrowed books. Kathy's mother read to her every night and she tried, usually unsuccessfully, to limit the number of books read to two books. There was no special writing practice at home but her mother said that she always had Kathy sign her name to any cards and letters they send to friends and relatives.

At preschool, there was no opportunity for Kathy to freely write anything. The only opportunity to use paper and markers was first thing in the morning -- usually before Kathy arrived at the center -- when each child had to sit down and trace and copy his or her name onto a sheet of paper. The following interaction was taped on a day when Kathy was able to participate in the classroom writing. Children were called upon in groups of two to trace their names with the teacher assistant who had prepared a dot-to-dot worksheet of each child's name.

| | |
|---|---|
| Child: | I did it good. |
| Teacher: | As long as you try. |
| Teacher: | [to same child] Look at what you're doing ( child looks up). You tried. You have a lot of time to learn how to write. [to another child] Good. You're going over it (dot-to-dot tracing of name). You know how to write your last name too. |
| Kathy: | I don't know how to make an e. |
| Teacher: | That's OK. Just try. (to Kathy) You forgot one --the h. (to other |

Teacher)I thought you said Kathleen knew how to write her name. (to same child) Try again. I think you can do better.

There was no discussion about print or any assistance with the identification or formation of letters. In the absence of any guidance, one child called the N -- the first letter of his name -- "the up and down letter" because that is how he represented it to himself in order to remember it.

Given Kathy's interest in books and the opportunities she had to listen to storybook readings, it should not be surprising that she is a skilled storyteller who quickly integrates elements from text she has heard into her own literary discourse. Given the limited opportunities that Kathy had to construct written messages of any sort, however, it also should not be surprising that she had little idea of how to create a written text or even a picture that might represent her own story ideas. When asked to write a story Kathy drew "something" and then told the following story, tracing over some lines and creating new ones as she spoke (See Figure 3).

> This is a tunnel, and this tunnel will lead to Baby Buntny mother's house so Baby Buntny can come home safely. Safely and dried, Mother Hubbard will be surprised. Yeah. And so when she gets home, she's gonna have to go to her where. [To Observer: You know what a where is? Well that's where you where, that's where you get safe and dry] ...so when Baby Buntny gets there, she's gonna find a little bad wolf. [So that's what I'm gonna make]. A little bad wolf that wants to go eat Baby Buntny. Baby Buntny is very [strong] Baby Buntnys are very strong. If they eat spinach, they are.

The retracing and reworking of the lines apparently represented the writing of the told story. Kathy then made what she called "scribble-scrabble," which she "read" in a sing-song voice as "to-to-to-to" and said was Baby Buntny's name, and "Shine-to-op-say," which she identified as the wolf's name. Her story has stylistic elements of Each Peach, Pear, Plum (Ahlberg & Ahlberg, 1989), which had been read to her earlier, plus Kathy managed to weave a bit of Popeye into the character of Baby Buntny. Structurally, the story takes on the look of a "trickster" folktale, since later into it, Baby Buntny outwits the wolf with a trap door in the tunnel. However, despite the skilled narration, Kathy is a child with little knowledge of print concepts. By the end of the year, when given a book and asked where to begin reading, she still identified the illustrations instead of the words.

Discussion: Valuing Literacy -- Valuing Children

Certainly, literacy resources were abundantly available to children we observed in private preschools, such as the university day care for students' families, and much less available to children in publicly funded preschools for low-income families. The inequities in materials and opportunities were indeed "savage" (Kozol, 1991). But preschools are more than just places that provide resources; preschools are communities of learners. Within these

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communities, teachers socialize children to behave in certain ways, to have particular expectations of each other, and to prefer or privilege certain experiences and knowledge. Children learn to value literacy as integral to their lives and to practice literate ways of knowing and talking.

Although not an explicit goal of any program, teachers in the university preschool -- a program with strong 1960s roots and a nonviolent, nonsexist, nonracist, and environmentally sensitive philosophy -- initiated children into the literate practices and rituals of the community and provided children with the support needed to maintain engagement and understanding. For example, the teacher arranged for the children to be part of a campaign to save the rainforest. She brought the children to the local mall where they received a certificate from the Nature Company verifying that they (or their sponsors) bought an acre of the rainforest in Belize. The teacher explained to the children "that money goes toward the Nature Company helping to save one acre of rainforest. And this is the certificate we got. And this says [the teacher reads the text, *in italics*] *The nature conservancy in grateful* ... That means that they're very thankful ... *recognition of your gift to adopt and help protect one acre of rainforest at the Rio Bravo conservation area in Belize.... The land signified above will be managed by the program for Belize....* We'll pass this around and you may take a look at it.... This is a letter they wrote to us about helping to save that acre.... *Your acre and the money that goes to protect it will protect the Rio Bravo in Belize.* That's what we said already and you know what? The money is being used where it's needed most -- to help protect the ground. They purchase the land and then they hire people who have gone to school to be rangers. Does anyone know what a ranger might be?"

| | |
|---|---|
| Student: | I saw a ranger. |
| Teacher: | A ranger? A wildlife ranger or a forest ranger? |
| Student: | I know what a ranger is... It's a guy that helps the animals. |
| Teacher: | Yep and there's also forest rangers and they're people that help to save the forest and they also try to help to teach the people that live near this forest in Belize -- that we're helping to save -- they try to teach these people how to help and to make sure that we save that rainforest instead of cutting down the trees. It says that in the next few months we'll begin receiving newsletters that report the progress and how the things are going there. |
| Student: | And they'll plant new trees. |
| Teacher: | [passes newsletter around to children so each can see it] Nan-yoon let Qin-Qin have a look--give it to David. David did you see this yet? When you're done pass it to Qin Qin. |
| Teacher: | So they said thank you very much and right here's a letter. It's called a newsletter. We're going to be getting these every once in a while telling us about the progress on our acre. And what I'm going to do is I'm going to copy this letter and I'm going to give a copy to your parents so that you and your parents can read together about how we are saving the rainforest in Belize. OK? .... What Zack? |
| Student: | I have enough money to save the rainforest and I'm going to try and betect the trees. |
| Teacher: | Good. |
| Students: | Me too.... Sarah, I have some money to save the rainforest |

Teacher: Well good. I hope that that's what you use your money for. Now I'd like to start this book

Student: My mommy has some special magic money that you could put on top of the trees then when people try to cut down it doesn't fall.

Teacher: That would be nice if that could happen.

In this preschool, where Mei-Ling is a student, literate discourse is a part of everyday life. In this classroom, teachers just expect that children will be participants in literate discourse, learning to "'separate things of the imagination' from everyday life" (Heath , 1986; p.156) as well as build new images from the experiences of everyday life. Children's interpretations are solicited; they are acknowledged and valued.

Although it might be argued that publicly funded preschools exist to support the educational development of needy children, teachers and administrators seemed to hold an ambivalent stance toward literacy for the children. In Daqueesh's Head Start preschool, which has been serving children in this urban neighborhood for 27 years, the director told us that the goals for the program are based on the individual interests of the children:

> If the child comes in writing his name, [and] we do have children writing their names, and they are starting to pick up books, we encourage it.... If a child is starting to pick up books and read words, then the teacher will make sure that books are available and give that child that help when it is time to focus on him.

According to the director, each child is the focus of the teachers' attention on certain days, and teachers refer to him as the "focus child." If the focus child is interested in the letters of his name or writing his name, then the teacher can make this activity available to the whole group. No child in the group would be forced to participate, but they would be encouraged to take part. If there is no interest on the part of focus children, there would be no activity. However, the library area is always "open" for children to look at books. Children are not permitted to have dittoes ("a no-no") to color or write on, but they may use the coloring books they bring from home. In selecting books for the program, the director said she would look for books that got progressively harder, very much like other preschool materials of graded difficulty -- " books that just have pictures, books about the first day at school, and books that have more wording in them."

Nonetheless, the classroom library here was meager compared to the library at the university day care center. Over the course of the year about 80 different books were displayed for the children to read, compared to three times that number at the university day care. The majority of the books on display had been borrowed from the public library since the Head Start library held fewer than 70 titles, most of them older, donated books. As for the public library, this is the first year that teachers made weekly visits, according to the director. It is also the first time that children had been given their own library cards. Before, teachers signed books out in their own names, then were responsible if children lost or damaged the books.

The other publicly funded program is a day care center that has been serving children of

poor families in this urban community for 75 years. Administrators here, where Kathy attended preschool, received a Christmas gift of two thousand dollars to buy books for the children but had not yet spent it a year later. Rather than create classroom libraries, the director planned to create a resource library for teachers -- a larger version of the office library currently maintained at the center. This office library has about 60 different titles, which the teachers may borrow. If a book is lost, teachers must replace it. Children would not have access to books in the new library because the staff believe that most of the children do not know how to handle books responsibly. In fact, many of the books in the office library deal with effective parenting and childhood behavior problems, such as Joy Berry's (1982; 1984) series on Let's Talk About Throwing Tantrums, Let's Talk About Whining, Let's Talk About Being Rude, Bossy, Bullied, Careless. This center allows children to to handle only book fragments -- books with no covers, or books with missing and torn pages --- and provides no access to the public library. The teachers were hesitant to sign public library books out in their own names for classroom libraries for fear that the children would damage them. However, Kathy's teacher did read a variety of books to the children, including her own Christmas books. In the absence of a book budget, this teacher had to purchase her own books, which the children were not allowed to touch. Sometimes, when the teacher's bonus bookclub books arrived (largely accrued as a result of purchases by the research assistant), she would read several books to the children at one sitting. When children made connections between the books and their own experiences, or when children made connections across different texts, the teacher expressed surprise. She rarely acknowledged children's comments during read-alouds and often reprimanded children for speaking out while she was reading. Nonetheless, she apparently noticed the comments, as in her anecdote about Ben's Trumpet (Isadora, 1979):

> Let me think, It was Wednesday that I just read the kids whatever books that they wanted to hear and I was surprised that they remembered a book that Ihad read a long time ago about jazz. You see, I just got this book called Ben's Trumpet and it was about this little boy who just wanted to play jazz. The book was all about jazz. They liked that book and they wanted me to read it again. One of the kids made a connection and said, "My mom listens to Jazz."

Nonetheless, children here were viewed as generally less able to participate in literate discourse about books and writing because of the poverty of their out of school lives -- chaotic families, language delays, lack of experience. Teachers believed that children would not be able to concentrate on stories with a "lot of words" and that they would "pick up" writing when they were ready. Children were praised for "good remembering," not for creating possible worlds. In contrast to this view, teachers in the private preschool treated children as if they were already literate. They believed that the children were already story makers, and that literary experiences further "enriched their language and nourished their imagination."

We have made some tentative connections between classroom experiences and the development of three children's personal understandings of literary text. Clearly, Daqueesh, Mei-Ling, and Kathy are themselves unusual children. Even though Daqueesh and Kathy are poor (and their parents undereducated) and Mei-Ling is learning English as a second language, the children are extremely capable and highly motivated to read and write. All the children were

supported at home with resources (albeit these resources differ from home to home). Parents and teachers alike believed in these children as learners and they provided them with every opportunity that they themselves knew how to create for children. Nonetheless, we believe that limited classroom resources in terms of the number and varieties of books and limited opportunities to participate in literate activities impoverished the storyworlds that Daqueesh was able to create as well as the expression of Kathy's stories in written text. For children who are much less privileged by the support of home resources than Daqueesh, Mei-Ling, and Kathy, the resources of the preschool are even more important. Like Katherine Patterson (1989), we believe that "we share with children work of the imagination -- those sounds deepest in the human heart, often couched in symnbol and metaphor [....because] they invite children to go within themselves to listen to the sounds of their own hearts" (pp. 34-35).

**Note**

The project is a longitudinal study of the development of literary understandings in children and the relationship of such development to classroom experiences with literature. The conclusions drawn are those of the authors'.

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